



# Stress Symptoms

Stress affects us all. You may notice symptoms of stress when disciplining your kids, during busy times at work, when managing your finances, or when coping with a challenging relationship. Stress is everywhere. And while a little stress is OK -- some stress is actually beneficial -- too much stress can wear you down and make you sick, both mentally and physically.

The first step to controlling stress is to know the symptoms of stress. But recognizing stress symptoms may be harder than you think. Most of us are so used to being stressed, we often don't know we are stressed until we are at the breaking point.

## What Is Stress?

Stress is the body's reaction to harmful situations -- whether they're real or perceived. When you feel threatened, a chemical reaction occurs in your body that allows you to act in a way to prevent injury. This reaction is known as "fight-or-flight," or the stress response. During stress response, your heart rate increases, breathing quickens, muscles tighten, and blood pressure rises. You've gotten ready to act. It is how you protect yourself.

Stress means different things to different people. What causes stress in one person may be of little concern to another. Some people are better able to handle stress than others. And, not all stress is bad. In small doses, stress can help you accomplish tasks and prevent you from getting hurt. For example, stress is what gets you to slam on the breaks to avoid hitting the car in front of you. That's a good thing.

Our bodies are designed to handle small doses of stress. But, we are not equipped to handle long-term, chronic stress without ill consequences.

## What Are the Symptoms of Stress?

Stress can affect all aspects of your life, including your emotions, behaviors, thinking ability, and physical health. No part of the body is immune. But, because people handle stress differently, symptoms of stress can vary. Symptoms can be vague and may be the same as those caused by medical conditions. So it is important to discuss them with your doctor. You may experience any of the following symptoms of stress.

**Emotional symptoms** of stress include:

- Becoming easily agitated, frustrated, and moody
- Feeling overwhelmed, like you are losing control or need to take control
- Having difficulty relaxing and quieting your mind

- Feeling bad about yourself (low self-esteem), lonely, worthless, and depressed
- Avoiding others

**Physical symptoms** of stress include:

- Low energy
- Headaches
- Upset stomach, including diarrhea, constipation, and nausea
- Aches, pains, and tense muscles
- Chest pain and rapid heartbeat
- Insomnia
- Frequent colds and infections
- Loss of sexual desire and/or ability
- Nervousness and shaking, ringing in the ear, cold or sweaty hands and feet
- Dry mouth and difficulty swallowing
- Clenched jaw and grinding teeth

**Cognitive symptoms** of stress include:

- Constant worrying
- Racing thoughts
- Forgetfulness and disorganization
- Inability to focus
- Poor judgment
- Being pessimistic or seeing only the negative side

**Behavioral symptoms** of stress include:

- Changes in appetite -- either not eating or eating too much
- Procrastinating and avoiding responsibilities
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes
- Exhibiting more nervous behaviors, such as nail biting, fidgeting, and pacing

## **What Are the Consequences of Long-Term Stress?**

A little stress every now and then is not something to be concerned about. Ongoing, chronic stress, however, can cause or exacerbate many serious health problems,

including:

- Mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and personality disorders
- Cardiovascular disease, including heart disease, high blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythms, heart attacks, and stroke
- Obesity and other eating disorders
- Menstrual problems
- Sexual dysfunction, such as impotence and premature ejaculation in men and loss of sexual desire in both men and women
- Skin and hair problems, such as acne, psoriasis, and eczema, and permanent hair loss
- Gastrointestinal problems, such as GERD, gastritis, ulcerative colitis, and irritable colon

## Help Is Available for Stress

Stress is a part of life. What matters most is how you handle it. The best thing you can do to prevent stress overload and the health consequences that come with it is to know your stress symptoms.

If you or a loved one is feeling overwhelmed by stress, talk to your doctor. Many symptoms of stress can also be signs of other health problems. Your doctor can evaluate your symptoms and rule out other conditions. If stress is to blame, your doctor can recommend a therapist or counselor to help you better handle your stress.

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Sources <sup>^</sup>

SOURCES:

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